



take a hike!

Nicola Venning looks at why every one should embrace walking.

Whether it's to keep fit, make friends or just for a bit of fun, walking is one of the best activities you can do. It doesn't cost anything and other than a pair of comfy shoes and a bit of sunshine, you don't need specialist equipment or training. Anyone can take a hike.

Putting your best foot forward can also improve your health. Walking is a form of low impact exercise and is proven to boost the immune system, help manage weight and benefit the heart, lungs and blood pressure.

"Just make sure that you can feel your heart beating a bit faster than usual and you feel warm as you go. This indicates that your body is working hard enough to make a difference to your health," says Dr Timothy Woodman, Medical Director with BUPA.

Regular walking gives knee joints a good work-out, increases muscle strength and can help to keep bones

strong. Leading a generally active lifestyle, including walking, may help protect against osteoporosis.

"Not only can walking reduce joint pain, it can help to prevent back pain and alleviate it if it's already a problem for you," says Woodman.

“You are never too old to start walking.”

The Ramblers, Britain's Walking Charity, has teamed up with Macmillan Cancer Support to run Walking for Health in England. The scheme includes a network of short walks of up to 90 minutes, over easy terrain. "These walks are perfect for anyone who hasn't done much exercise before, but would like to

walk their way towards a happier and healthier future," says Simon Barnett, Director of Walking Development at The Ramblers.

Walking is also a great way of meeting people and making new friends. Over 9.1 million adults in England walk regularly for recreation; that is twice the number that swim and nearly three times the number of people that cycle, according to figures from Sport England.

The Ramblers arranges over 200,00 walks every year and has local walking groups across the UK. Walks take place at the weekends and some evenings and, whether you want a pleasant stroll or brisk hike, there is a level and length for everyone.

"Walking in a group with an experienced group leader provides a safe and sociable environment to help you find your feet. Ranging from city strolls to rural rambles, there's something to please everyone", says Barnett.

If you prefer walking independently or want to find a walk to enjoy with family and friends, The Ramblers' website also has a helpful route finder – just tap in your postcode. There are walks everywhere: from London to Lanarkshire.

Local community groups are also a good place to discover new walks. Find out if there are any Walking or Friend Associations attached to your local parks; the local library will also have information. The Government-backed initiative Walk4Life, which promotes walking for good health, lists over 85,000 walks and has over 30,000 members.

And if you want to feel really good, you can always fund-raise at the same time. Walking for charity is a growing and hugely popular way of both keeping fit and helping others. Win-win all round. Do It For Charity lists all kinds of walking events with UK charities.

Of course, Britain has always been a nation of walkers – and we have the paths to prove it! Ancient trackways, such as the Pilgrim's Way which stretches across the North Downs, have been used since the Stone Age. The Ridgeway, Britain's oldest road which



For more information or to find a walk, please visit

- www.ramblers.org.uk
- www.walkingforhealth.org.uk
- www.walk4life.info
- www.Doitforcharity.com

runs in part through the Chilterns, can trace its origins back to Neolithic times. There are 140,000 miles of Rights of Way which criss-cross England and Wales, making Britain one of the most walk-friendly countries in the world. So whether you want a long ramble or a short stroll, both are on your doorstep.

And if you've never been active, walking is one of the easiest ways to get started. Begin slowly and build walking into your daily routine so that it becomes a habit – that way it will be easier to keep it up. Walk to the shops instead of driving; walk up

escalators and use stairs instead of the lift. Consider organising a walk for your whole family: walking is beneficial for everyone and will give you a chance to spend time together. Instead of going to a café to catch up with a friend, arrange to go for a walk with them instead. Woodman says, "You are never too old to start walking".

